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ABSTRACT

Interest in preschool programs appears to be increasing, but the experts continue to disagree over the value of such programs. This review of recent developments accomplishes the following: (1) looks at the popular acceptance of a school-sponsored, universal, voluntary, free, prekindergarten program in South Tama County, Iowa; (2) notes research findings about the impact of Head Start programs and the Perry Preschool Project in Ypsilanti, Michigan; (3) cites recent state legislation supporting early education; and (4) discusses social changes affecting the acceptance of preschool programs. School boards considering adoption of preschool programs are urged to be clear about the characteristics of their programs and the terminology used to describe them, to recognize legitimate goals of preschool programs, to assess local needs and resources carefully, and to obtain community advice on preschool program policy. (PGD)

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With the jury still debating whether preschool initiatives by public schools are educationally sound or essential, a small rural school system has gone ahead and cleared the path. Media fanfare may accompany such programs in large, urban areas such as in New York City, but the South Tama County (Iowa) school system quietly implemented a voluntary, universal, prekindergarten program last fall that enrolls 97 percent of the community's eligible four-year-olds.

The question today, says South Tama curriculum director Donald E. Meyerhoff, who was serving as acting superintendent when the program was initiated, is not whether it has been successful, but what might happen if it suddenly was discontinued.

"If the school board ever decided to get rid of this program," Meyerhoff says, "the school system probably would end up with a new board and a new superintendent. That's how strongly the community feels about it."

That hasn't always been the case, however. To accommodate the preschool, South Tama (K-12, 2,090 students) had to switch from a half-day, full-week kindergarten program to a full-day, three-times-a-week program. The preschool meets on the remaining alternate two days.

"It's hard on the children to attend all day," says board president Ann Shilhanek, acknowledging the community's initial concern, "but, overall, parents have indicated they feel the advantages outweigh the disadvantages."

The preschoolers attend all day as well, although parents can opt to send their children only for the morning session. At first, the parents of seven students chose that option, but five of those seven now attend all day. Only one student has dropped out of the program, according to Meyerhoff, and that was a very young four-year-old.

Debbie Demmon-Berger is a Maryland-based freelance writer with a special interest in education issues.

Why preschool?

The motivations for developing a preschool program are many, and South Tama's effort reflects one of the most commonly cited: If some children—notably those whose parents can afford it—are privy to preschool programs that give children a head start on formal learning, then all children should have that opportunity.

According to Shilhanek, the South Tama board recognized that preschool was becoming a nationwide phenomenon. The board considered it important that South Tama students whose parents could not afford it (but were economically ineligible for Head Start) have access to that early advantage. Further impetus came from the rural nature of the community (transportation of children to preschool programs is unavailable), and the scarcity of private programs in the area.

Even so, the vote in June 1985 to implement the program was 3-2, and a questionnaire to gauge interest sent to parents prior to the program beginning showed an approval of only 53 percent.

Nature of program

In setting up its program, South Tama took pains to ensure that the focus would not be on formal education.

"It's based on what the child wants and can do," notes Meyerhoff. "The primary purpose is socialization, a particular concern in rural areas where children often have minimal contact with other children before entering school." Increasing the child's vocabulary and beginning math concepts are secondary goals, he adds.

"At no time has anyone suggested that this program will or should make the child a better reader in kindergarten," says Meyerhoff. "The last thing we want is for the preschool program to become teacher-directed."

South Tama County certainly isn't the only school system to offer a prekindergarten program, but it surely is one of only a few to offer such a program to all youngsters, not just to the disadvantaged, and to do so without charging fees; the $20 that South Tama parents pay annually is used for afternoon snacks.

Research consensus lacking

What singles out such a program even further is that there still is no consensus among child development experts concerning the validity of formal education for young children, especially those age four and younger.

On the one hand, research indicates a positive benefit from such programs when they are designed for the disadvantaged. Recent reports of the impact of the Head Start program, which has served 8.5 million low-income children since its creation in 1965, suggest that Head Start children "are stronger physically and mentally and are better prepared to cope with their achievement." Moreover, the involvement of parents in the program has led to increased family aspirations for these children.

While findings also show that test score gains in cognitive ability do not hold up beyond a few years, that is not necessarily an indictment of Head Start, says Charles Smith, director of one of

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the research studies (*The Impact of Head Start on Children, Families and Communities: Head Start Synthesis Project*). Rather, he says, it shows that the transition between the program and the schools must be improved.

Much attention also has focused on *Changed Lives*, a report of the Perry Preschool Project on the project's students—children from a low-income neighborhood in Ypsilanti, Mich.—who were tracked through age 19. The findings show increased graduation, employment, and college/job training rates for those individuals who completed the preschool versus a control group of eligible youngsters who did not attend.

Moreover, pregnancy, welfare, and arrest rates were significantly lower for the preschool group. The project's chief researchers, David P. Weikart and Lawrence Schweinhart, also determined that the cost of educating a preschool student through high school was $34,813 (adjusted for inflation), while the cost for a child who had not attended preschool was $41,895; the higher cost for non-preschoolers reflects the costs of remedial education.

Commented Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers: "*Changed Lives* should change the emphasis of the education reform movement. Much of the literature over the past year and a half has been aimed at changing high schools. That's fine, but there has been little realization in these reports—and in the push for reform generally—that high school is at the end of the educational process and that many of the problems found in high school are not, in and of themselves, high school problems but rather the failure to do the right thing at an earlier age."

In contrast, such noted child psychologists as Burton White and Edward F. Zigler believe the push for preschool programs may be ill advised. Says White, director of the Center for Parent Education in Newton, Mass., "If children suffer from no educational delays, spending money on programs for three- and four-year-olds would be a very unwise expenditure. No sound evidence proves it's worth doing."

Zigler, who was the first director of the U.S. Office of Child Development and now is Sterling Professor of Psychology at Yale University, believes educators are misreading parental interest in full-day kindergartens and prekindergarten programs. "What many parents are expressing is less a burning desire for preschool education than their need for affordable, high-quality day care," Zigler said in a recent report on early childhood education in *Principal* magazine (May 1986).

Moreover, he suggests that the universal preschool is not a cost-effective way of using scarce education funds to achieve equity. And finally, Zigler agrees with David Elkind, author of *The Hurried Child* and *The Miseducation of Children: Superkids at Risk*, that children today are being driven too hard and are being deprived of "their most precious commodity—their childhood."

Elkind himself, writing in the June 1986 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, cautions that the quality of preschool education be carefully scrutinized. Drawing on Jean Piaget's theories regarding the different way in which young children learn—in their manipulation of the environment rather than formal learning through symbolic rules, Elkind insists that "it is not out-of-home care for young children that is potentially harmful—only the wrong kind of out-of-home care. Sound early childhood education is an extension of the home, not of the school."

Efforts persist

The move for preschool programs continues nonetheless. Indeed, so many early childhood issues have cropped up in the various state legislatures, to say nothing of state boards of education agendas, that the National Conference of State Legislators last year pronounced this "the most significant new area of legislative activity in the area of education." Preschool education, which includes kindergarten as well as programs for children younger than five, is a part of nearly every education reform package:

- In 1983, not a single state mandated that school systems provide kindergarten programs; today, 30 do. In 1985, Kentucky lowered its compulsory kindergarten age to five; Governor Martha Layne Collins said the change was intended to ensure that all children in the state would have a preschool experience.
- Georgia enacted legislation in 1985 requiring all public schools to offer 180 days of full-day kindergarten beginning no later than 1987. South Carolina enacted similar legislation in 1984.
- Texas has committed $49 million to an ambitious prekindergarten program for the state's low-income and disadvantaged four-year-olds. "The whole philosophy of the [Texas] school reform law was to take the money spent on remediation in high school and put it in the early grades where it will do more good," noted John Cole, president of the Texas Federation of Teachers.
- Legislation enacted in Louisiana in 1985 requires students either to attend a half-day kindergarten program or pass a readiness test before entering first grade.

Problems remain

This is not to say that all is working smoothly.

School systems in Texas can seek waivers on the basis of space shortage. According to a *Dallas Morning News* article (March 21, 1986), fewer than half of the 80,000 eligible four-year-olds statewide were being served.

New York City's far-reaching plan to provide universal preschool for four-year-olds, supported publicly by Mayor Edward I. Koch and State Commissioner of Education Gordon M. Ambach, has fallen on financial hard times resulting in a considerably less ambitious program when it debuts this fall.

Despite the problems, however, the reality is that preschool and kindergarten programs are here to stay. How they evolve will vary according to state and local norms, but it seems apparent that it is only a matter of time before most

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states mandate that kindergarten programs be offered and a large percentage implement prekindergarten programs, at least for the disadvantaged.

Pressures on schools

Many believe it is the public schools that can best offer these programs. Others believe that the schools already are being asked to do too much and should let the private marketplace fill the void. But the pressures both for education reform and for programs that address changing societal needs aren't likely to wane in the near future. Consider:

Fact—59 percent of all women with children under the age of 18, and 62 percent of those with preschoolers, are employed full time. Projections suggest that those figures will rise to 70 percent by 1990. The myth of mother at home baking cookies and whiling away a summer's day reading stories to the kids dies hard. It certainly is not a reality (and may never have been), however, for the vast majority of children under five who are in custodial care of varying degrees and quality.

Fact—Researchers in Chicago surveyed 134 kindergarten teachers who found it difficult to use all of the hours in a full-day program effectively; they noted specifically the youngsters' fatigue in the afternoons. But of 800 parents who were surveyed, 90 percent favored full-day kindergarten.

Fact—More than 70 percent of families with incomes of $25,000 or more enroll their children in organized programs for four-year-olds or younger children; fewer than 37 percent of the less affluent do. It was to eliminate that disparity that prompted both South Tama County and New York City to propose prekindergarten programs. The numerous inquiries from educators received by South Tama about its program indicate that the groundswell of interest in such a program continues to grow.

Talk the same language

If your board is considering starting an early childhood program, keep in mind that the terminology means different things to different people. Kindergarten is such a program, as are the programs offered at many day-care centers.

In between are a myriad of other types of programs and philosophies:

- prekindergarten programs designed to give disadvantaged youngsters a boost in language development;
- home instruction programs that teach parents how to teach their children;
- part-time prekindergartens that operate similarly to the many private programs catering to a middle-class clientele;
- child/parent classes geared toward the young five- or nearly five-year-olds who aren't developmentally ready for kindergarten;
- transitional classes between kindergarten and first grade.

Whatever form it takes, the experts are saying that formal learning, the "pushing down" of the curriculum, has no place in the classroom where young children are involved. Prekindergarten programs must not become merely "junior kindergartens," says Weikart. Elementary phonics and numbers skills "should not be on the agenda."

Some basic criteria for early childhood programs

Millions of dollars are being invested in early childhood programs. To get the most quality from those dollars, Lawrence Schweinhart of the High Scope Educational Research Foundation, Ypsilanti, Mich., makes these suggestions:

- For long-term effects, the adult/child ratio never should exceed 1:10; the size of the classroom group should be no more than 20.
- Early childhood teachers and aides need specialized training.
- A validated curriculum model—derived from principles of child development, implemented by trained teachers, and with support systems to maintain the model—is essential. (To achieve this goal, South Tama County entered into a cooperative arrangement with nearby Central College in Pella, Iowa.)
- Strong administrative support that provides teachers with training opportunities, planning time, and feedback from evaluation.
- Close ties with parents who can reinforce the program with at-home learning.
- Adequate facilities and equipment—not just a makeshift arrangement.

Assess local need

In light of the demographic changes in communities, shifts in family structure and lifestyle, and the growing body of research indicating positive benefits of preschool education, school boards will find it increasingly difficult to ignore the issue. Instead, begin planning how your school system will address the issue by assessing local needs, your ability to meet those needs, and relevant policy questions.

Some useful tasks to undertake are:

- a demographic study of your community to reveal data and trends regarding births (with a break-out of numbers and percent of disadvantaged and special needs children), single parent households, and families with two-working-parents;
- a determination of space availability for preschool programs, the availability of teachers with early childhood preparation, and financial implications;
- data regarding the availability and quality of preschool programs already available in the community.

In addition, find out what initiatives your state legislature and state school board have on their agendas and inform state leaders about your local needs, constraints, and plans.

When your research is complete, you may want to consider forming an advisory committee to develop recommendations regarding such policy issues as:

- the scope of the program (to serve all youngsters or only children with special needs, for example);
- the age of youngsters to be served;
- the program philosophy and curriculum (including the nature of parent involvement);
- the length of the school day;
- teacher qualifications and compensation;
- teacher/student ratio and group size;
- who will provide fiscal support.

Include on your advisory committee educators, parents, and representatives of public agencies that serve young children and local businesses that employ their parents. Community involvement can go far toward building understanding of the purpose and nature of the program as well as provide additional information to use in developing creative solutions. The result will be broad-based support for however you decide to respond. ■